

Some years ago an experiment was set up to find out whether, given free choice, young children would choose foods that were good for them. Every day for a month a wide selection of foods was placed before them and they helped themselves to whatever they fancied. Records were kept of the kinds and quantities of food chosen by each child. At the end of the month it was found that each child had selected the varieties and amounts of food that together, over the month, made up a perfect diet.

Observers of wild animals had long before concluded that, after the initial period of total dependence, equivalent to the breast-feeding period in human infants, they did this for themselves. The human experiment confirmed that all living organisms operate on principles of self-regulation: they eat what is good for them; they do what ensures their survival and they reach a balanced relationship with other members of the same species, with other species and with their environment.

When young children are allowed to play together over a period of months some children will use their greater size or strength to get exclusive use of certain toys or more than their fair share of food and sweets. Provided that adults do not interfere too soon, corrective action will be seen to start. The persistent bully, the grabber or the cheat will find that the others will protest that it is 'not fair', and if he continues will ostracise him or simply refuse to play with him. The offender now finds himself deprived of what is more important to him than either sweets or toys, viz. the companionship of other children, and will begin to modify his behaviour to win them back. George Dennison in The Lives of Children shows in detail how the other members of a basketball team deal with the one who persistently flouts the rules. They stop the game and refuse to play on until he has undertaken to play fair. The offender is then very careful to keep to the rules because he wants to play. These children came, not from 'well brought-up' middle-class families, but from the slums of New York.

One of the most exciting intellectual feats is to master a language - linguistic studies over the past three decades show just how complicated are the structures of language for even daily speech: yet within three years of birth all but disabled children acquire such mastery of their mother tongue without effort. Young immigrant children acquire proficiency in the host language long before their parents, if they are allowed to mix with other native children. I often found it necessary to use Greek- or Turkish-Cypriot children as interpreters when their parents visited the school. Many of these children had had very little regular schooling in the remote villages from which they came: their education had come more through their helping parents and neighbours in the daily work of the village. Yet they displayed a higher level of curiosity and intelligence than most of their London classmates.

Many small schools have been started on the assumption that education should be an activity characterised by joyous absorption in whatever interested the children. A.S. Neill's Summerhill, Dora Russell's Telegraph House, Susan Isaac's The Malting House are some of the best-known in this country. More recently there has been a mushroom growth of Free Schools. In America, between the wars, a much larger experiment was begun, with the cooperation of thirty schools and a group of universities, to test the belief that children are better educated when they themselves participate in the decisions that affect them.

Records were kept of the sex, race, class, socio-economic status, I.Q., etc. of the children. Each child was matched as closely as possible with another child from a school not in the experimental group, so as to provide a control group. The cooperating universities waived their entrance requirements so as to leave the schools as free as possible to experiment with their own curricula and methods. They also undertook to keep detailed records of the students' activities and progress as undergraduates and graduates.

Within the group of thirty schools some decided to continue as they had done in the past, using the same objectives, criteria and methods that they felt had served them well. At the other extreme some schools virtually started from scratch. The staff, parents and children sat down together to work out what they should do and how they should do it. In the following Fall the first of their students entered the universities.

After twelve years the first report of the experiment was published. It ran to twelve volumes and was summarised by James Hemmings in Teach Them to Live. The results showed, overwhelmingly, that the students from the thirty schools had not only showed themselves to take part most fully in the general life of the university - clubs, sports, music, arts, drama - but that they had carried off all the major academic prizes. Further, when results were broken down within the thirty schools, those schools which had most radically revised their assumptions, contents and methods produced the students who distinguished themselves not only by being the most active in general university life, but by winning the most prestigious awards in the academic field. In only two areas did the experimental schools score lower than the control group: in the rote-learning aspects of modern languages and in attendance at church.

I refer to this study, The Thirty Schools Experiment, because it was systematically recorded, it was large-scale, and used control groups, and because there was no suggestion that it was politically motivated or funded. English experiments have always been on a very small scale and have, therefore, been dismissed by most academics. Nevertheless the results from these schools have shown trends similar to those in the American experiment - full participation in university or college life and good academic results. More importantly, though this is a subjective view formed after meeting many people from 'progressive' schools, they seem to retain a vitality, a sense of freshness and hope in dealing with life's problems that contrasts with the more subdued attitudes of those from conventional schools. Similarly, pupils who have spent some time in Free Schools have, in my own experience, shown a more vibrant curiosity and vitality than children with similar backgrounds in ordinary state schools.

Why then have such clear pointers been so obviously ignored by those who maintain and conduct our schools? Since 1870 successive governments and local authorities have made education compulsory and kept a close watch, through Her Majesty's Inspectors and Local Inspectors, on the content of curricula and on the efficiency of the teachers. Until very recently 'discipline' was universally maintained by physical punishment. Only Church schools have, so far, refused to abolish such punishment.

Some perceptive people in government and in administration are uneasy with the present system. John Newsom, Director of Education for Hertfordshire, who totally approved in principle of what my staff and I were doing in Howe Dell School, nevertheless told me, quite frankly, that he could no longer continue as Director if he supported me against his Committee and its Chairman, a wine gum manufacturer called Maynard, at a time when Maynard was trying to insist that I used the cane in the school.

The overwhelming fact of our society that makes it not only difficult but impossible to reorganise our system of education so as to provide a good education for all children is that we are a nation divided into rich and poor! Those who own wealth and exercise power send their children to private schools and have done so for generations, thereby ensuring a head start for their children. Those who do the manual and poorly paid work - nearly half the population - cannot afford such schools and have to make do with state schools.

This division of society reached its present intense form with the Industrial Revolution and the removal of the bulk of the people from agriculture and the more autonomous life of the countryside. Factories needed almost completely amenable people to suit the machine-like style of life needed by machine production. Schools, first founded by the Churches to teach literacy so that people could read the Bible and be saved, had to 'contain' the gangs of young people too young for work, while their parents worked in the factories. They too were built and run like factories, with learning subdivided and processed like raw materials in manufacture. Their effect was to condition the young to think of themselves as material to be dealt with by authority as it wished.

The curricula and methods of the schools focussed on commercial and industrial practice so that the students inevitably came to regard themselves as being shaped, like parts of a machine, for lifelong use as 'appendages' to machines - without individuality or dignity. Education was for work, certainly not for leisure or for life. People were part of the production machine for the generation of wealth. Their wages were part of the costs of production, not the reward for cooperation in that production, and so to be kept down to the tolerable minimum.

That attitude to education for the nation's children has remained to this day, though now less obviously blatant. Waves of rationalisation have sought to mask the evil facts of greedy privilege: intelligence was innate and some had it while most did not; the 'democratic' process ensured that the will of the majority would prevail; competition in examinations would ensure that 'merit' was rewarded ...

Whether we like it or not the mask is falling away. The press and TV, mostly providing 'bread and circuses', cannot avoid revealing some of the facts. A hundred years ago only the rich and their immediate retainers and servants knew just how they lived. Today we can all see it on the 'box'.

Parents intuitively know that with good education their children are capable of doing most jobs. This intuition is borne out both by practical experience and by research. Intelligence is created by good education - even Lord Boyle, the Conservative Minister of Education at the time, pointed this out in the first Newsom Report. That is why the wealthy send their children to schools which can employ the most highly qualified teachers to teach small groups of children very intensively. Because experience and common sense have long accepted that more personal tuition is better, those who wish to reduce expenditure on state education have funded questionable research that claims to show that larger classes do not affect the quality of the education.

In all societies, without exception, the system of education closely reflects in organisation, objectives and values, the structure of the parent society. It follows that no amount of propaganda will convince the people of this country that equality of educational opportunity genuinely exists or can exist until the deep class divisions between the wealth-power group and the mass of ordinary people are removed by more democratic participation of working people at all levels of government. The human body is a model for consideration. Whereas it was once thought that the head ruled the whole body, we now know that the harmonious integration that is the living organism is possible only because each part has a function in supporting the whole and each depends for its functioning on the healthy operation of the rest.